

To Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski, Commissioners Michael Copps, Mignon Clyburn and Robert McDowell:

Why Do So Many Groups Support Anti Competitive AT&T T Mobil Merger (That Should Be Blocked)?

AT&T's proposal to buy T-Mobile has garnered a strange and diverse group of allies, including New Hampshire firefighters, black doctors, and Filipino artists.

The FCC has now received more than 10,000 public comments about the AT&T/T-Mobile merger, and they're falling into two main buckets: individuals opposing the merger (many with auto-generated robo-comments from consumer advocacy Web sites), and groups or organizations supporting it.

I should note here that there are certainly organizations that oppose the merger, and have gone on record as such (notably Sprint and Public Knowledge). On the other side, there are some individuals who support it, too. But the vast majority of the comments submitted to the FCC fell into those two buckets.

Running down the first thousand comments on the site, I couldn't find a single organization with letterhead opposing the merger, and they seem to have some similar arguments. I called about a dozen of the groups?three answered in time for this story?to look into why they felt the need to speak.

Most of the letters said the merger will lead to more high-speed Internet access nationwide, but we're getting more high-speed Internet access anyway; Verizon seems to announce new 4G cities daily, and T-Mobile has already described plans to light up 55 cities with LTE-like speeds this summer. So I looked for reasons beyond merely "there will be more 4G."

One more thing: a statement of bias. I've written some strong opinions opposing this merger. But I still want to give the Americans who support it a clear voice, and understand where they're coming from.

The Unions

"As a president of a labor union, I happen to support other companies that respect them," said David Lang, president of the Professional Fire Fighters of New Hampshire. AT&T's supporter list includes a roll-call of labor groups from the AFL-CIO to Unite Here. They're unified with a simple message: AT&T workers belong to a union, while T-Mobile has busted unions. So AT&T ownership would be better for workers than T-Mobile's current management.

There's an ongoing effort to unionize T-Mobile workers led by the Communications Workers of America and ver.di, a large German union. If you read their Web page, they sound pretty frustrated.

So rather than keep fighting the current owners of T-Mobile, they've decided to throw their lot in with AT&T.

"The worldwide labor movement has focused global attention on T-Mobile's bad labor rights history, which will be reversed under an AT&T acquisition," the American Federation of Teachers writes in its letter.

The Free Marketers

Organizations that generally oppose government regulation are lining up in support of the merger. Those include the State Chamber of Oklahoma, a business organization which writes "we believe that entrepreneurship and innovation should be supported by laws and policies, not restricted by them," and Jobs for New England Now, a group that believes "New England has been burdened by an anti-business mentality."

The many chambers of commerce, including groups in the LA area and in St. Louis, MO, supporting the merger also seem to fall under this category?although they also generally argue about wireless coverage, as I'll point out below.

The Ethnic Groups

This one initially baffled me. The AT&T/T-Mobile merger is supported by a genuinely bizarre array of ethnic-related organizations. The California Journal for Filipino Americans, the National (Black) Medical Association, and the Filipino American Arts Exposition don't seem like the kinds of groups who'd have opinions on wireless issues, but here they are.

I got in touch with Irene Portillo, head of Project Amiga, an LA-based nonprofit which focuses on education and job training for low-income Latinos. She said that in the area they serve, AT&T is strong and T-Mobile isn't. An expansion of AT&T would lead to job opportunities for her constituents, she said.

"Verizon only covers a certain area of our communities. It's like they divided the area into a couple of groups; Verizon's one, and AT&T is another. If it's going to be kept that way, I can understand what they're looking for," she said.

The Coverage Argument

Americans really want rural broadband, or at least to be able to make phone calls when they're in the boonies. The 4G buildouts so far have focused on major cities, and rural areas are feeling left out?even though Verizon has promised it'll get around to them.

AT&T has promised rural LTE, and that's brought out a lot of rural and farming organizations in

support. Ann Robinett from Arizona Parents for Education makes her position clear: she's an AT&T customer, her daughter is going to school in Flagstaff, and she's behind anything that would make AT&T coverage there better.

The Montana Farmers Union supports the merger; T-Mobile has lousy coverage in Montana. Ditto for the South Dakota Farmers Union.

The AT&T Relatives

AT&T is a big company with its fingers in a lot of pies. I didn't find any real evidence of "astroturfing" going on?nobody told me their letter had been solicited by AT&T. But when I called Sam Duran at the Urban Corps of San Diego County, he readily admitted that his focus is on job training and conservation programs in the San Diego area?not on wireless.

Then I noticed that one of the board members for his organization is Christine Moore, AT&T's director of external affairs.